

# **West Winch Common**

City and Guilds 9231 Certificate Module 1

Photography Project

1998-1999

Tom Ruffles

## **Introduction**

In 1998-9 I undertook a City and Guilds Certificate in Photography at the College of West Anglia in King's Lynn, Norfolk. Part 1 of the Certificate involved two modules both of which had to be passed in order to proceed to Part 2. The first module was a general introduction in which we learned the basics of photography and how to use a single-lens reflex camera. One of the course requirements was a project of our own choice, a series of photographs with a brief commentary, to be processed commercially.

I decided to compile a series of images of the large common in the village where I was then living, West Winch. This project I have now scanned and it is presented here as submitted, apart from the deletion of my then address. I had only previously used an SLR once or twice, in a casual way, so it was a steep learning experience. For the course I bought a second-hand Pentax Super-A with a 50mm lens, later supplemented by a second-hand Miranda MS3 with a 28-70mm zoom lens, and pottered about trying to get the hang of the technology. My introductory notes say that we were limited to ten images for our submission, but for some reason I have eleven; I suspect I did not count the first one, as I referred to it as a 'record shot'. The results look more washed out than I remember, and I suspect the dyes have faded over the last 16 years.

I passed the module and went on to the next, which was 'Introduction to Black & White Photography.' This consisted of learning how to take and process photographs using black and white film and was great fun. I bought film in bulk, cut it and put it in canisters, developed the results and printed them in the college's darkroom. I didn't submit this module because repeating it seemed a good way of continuing to have access to the darkroom facilities. Unfortunately I wasn't quick enough re-enrolling the following year, and found that the course was full. Then circumstances changed and I wasn't in a position to go back, so I never completed Part 1. However, even though I am not likely to use a wet darkroom again, the experience was fascinating, and the lessons of permanent value in understanding the production of photographs.

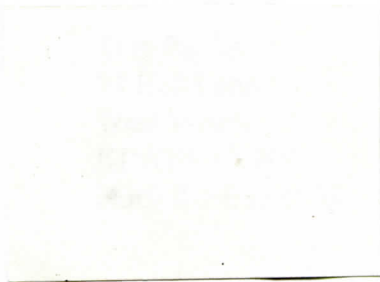
Tom Ruffles

June 2015

**C & G 9231**

**MODULE 1**

**PHOTOGRAPHY WORKBOOK**



# WEST WINCH COMMON

## Statement of Intent

As this is more or less the first time I have used a 35mm SLR, I wanted to familiarise myself with its capabilities, and work on aspects of composition. Also, the north end of the common which I chose to photograph has been under threat of development (currently in abeyance) from time to time, and it seemed a good idea to record the common in case drastic changes occur there in future.

Upon completion of the module, I hope to have achieved confidence in my ability to see the potential in a scene, choose the best angle, and try to notice all aspects of the composition before taking the picture, rather than regret mistakes, which could have been avoided at the taking stage, when looking at the print.

## West Winch Common

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The 220-acre<sup>2</sup> West Winch Common lies in the village of West Winch, south of King's Lynn. The common runs from Hardwick Narrows in the north to Setchey in the south, a distance of about two miles, and varies from about 1/3 mile to as little as 100 yards across. There are several points of access along its length for pedestrians, and cars can also be driven in at one point. To the north of the common are fields, commercial development and the A47/Southern Bypass; to the west is farmland and the railway line between King's Lynn and Cambridge; to the south is Setchey industrial estate, and to the east is housing, mostly post-war, filling in the gap between the common and the A10. Running north-south roughly through the middle is a drainage ditch, the Puny Drain, crossed at a number of points by bridges in various states of decrepitude.

The freehold of the common is owned by the Marquis of Cholmondeley. Graziers - commoners who manage the common in exchange for the right to graze cattle there - levy a rate on themselves to maintain it, a system with its origins in the mediaeval period. The rate is used for maintenance, drainage (allegedly, though this aspect of management does not seem particularly successful) of what is mostly reclaimed marsh land, and weed control. The common is not a public space, though people are allowed onto it under certain conditions (as indicated on the sign in the first photograph). Its private status is attested to by newspaper stories concerning cattle entering gardens through unauthorised gates<sup>3</sup>. Those living in adjacent houses do not have the right to build their own entrances onto the common.

There have been suggestions in the past that the land could be developed. For example, in 1990, a bypass for West Winch was mooted, and one proposal<sup>4</sup> would have entailed building a road across the north end of the common. In 1995 the Borough Council proposed that a dual carriageway could cut across the common to open the area around Hardwick Narrows for redevelopment<sup>5</sup>. This would have helped to ease congestion on the A47 and allowed about 700 homes to be built. These schemes have been opposed by West Winch and North Runcion parish councils, who fear both the loss of a valuable amenity, and the danger of absorption into a Greater King's Lynn conurbation which further development around Hardwick roundabout might bring.

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of the information given here was gleaned from the West Winch file at King's Lynn public library.

<sup>2</sup> An information booklet published by West Winch and Setchey Parish Council gives the size as 210 acres (1988, p.5).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Lynn News, 17 April 1992

<sup>4</sup> The "Black Route" appropriately enough

<sup>5</sup> Lynn News 14 November 1995



## Research and Planning

Although I have walked on the common for a number of years, I had not contemplated photographing it before. Consequently I thought it appropriate to consider what I hoped to achieve before starting the project.

To begin with, the period available (roughly September to January) would not see the area at its best in terms of foliage, and the usual autumnal compensation of multi-coloured leaves is of little use in an area which boasts few tree species. The challenge would be to make interesting images of the few features in a rather flat landscape. The other problem I foresaw, apart from indifferent weather and short days, would be lack of variety in the sky, and indeed overcast conditions were the norm.

On a more theoretical level, I scanned photography primers, many of which have sections on landscapes, as well as journals, to see what sort of landscape photographs were being taken. Many of the magazine contributions submitted by readers are of the countryside, and their different ways of treating the subject helped me to look at familiar surroundings with a fresh eye. Of the professionals, I found Ansel Adams and Lee Frost's work interesting in their very different ways, though of limited relevance to my situation, and Brian Bower's *Lens, Light and Landscape* (David and Charles, 1993) gave a good overview. I also considered the British landscape tradition in painting.

I made a number of forays onto the common, at different times of day and at varying degrees of coldness, where I shot several rolls on a Pentax Super-A, with a 50mm lens, and a Miranda MS3, with a 28-70mm zoom lens. These were the first pictures I had taken with either camera, so I was attempting to learn their mechanisms at the same time as I was considering elements of composition. I was determined not to rely on automatic exposure (though I did use the TTL metering) and always used the aperture-priority mode. I tried using a tripod for some shots, but found it cumbersome, so most photographs were hand-held. Film used was Boots (200 and 400 ISO), and processing was carried out by Bonusprint.

## Evaluation

My first impression on opening the packets of photographs was one of disappointment. Echoing Capa, I felt that in many cases the photograph was uninteresting because I had not got close enough. What had seemed reasonable in the viewfinder became insipid on paper. Also, years of snapping family members had caused me to tend to place major features in the centre of the image rather than strive for other configurations. On the whole the best pictures were the ones taken in mist, which had a nice grey ethereal quality, and those, like the drainage ditch and railway line, in which perspective is most evident.

My original plan had been to document the ways in which the common - ostensibly a natural environment - is imposed upon by human activities, so that for example I photographed building work and the industrial estate on the periphery, overflow pipes draining out, electricity pylons and telegraph poles, fences, the bridges and so on. Unfortunately most of these were fairly dull, which reduced the number of pictures suitable for inclusion here. I would also like to have included some pictures of cows, a major feature of the warmer months, but I could not get close enough to record anything interesting, and in any case they were only present for part of the time I was taking photos, as they go inside during the cold weather.

As well as pictures with a deep focus designed to show the common as clearly as possible, I also experimented with a shallow depth of field in order to attempt differential focusing techniques, and took close-ups of vegetation with the Miranda lens's macro facility. These worked well in their own ways, but were not deemed to be of sufficient interest to make the final selection (the limit to ten made for some hard choices).

If I were to do this project again, I would use a longer lens, make an effort to get in closer, recite "rule of thirds" to myself when looking through the viewfinder and use some filter effects (including a polariser) to try to lift a dull sky. I would also, budget allowing, try a more punchy film such as Fuji Velvia, which is favoured by many landscape photographers, and be more aware of contrast, something which was a problem in several pictures. The final lesson I learned was that when conducting this type of photography, a personal stereo is useful, and stout waterproof boots and thermal underwear essential.



Photograph 1

Pentax Super-A, 50mm lens, Boots ISO 200. October 1998.



This sign, listing the restrictions on use of the common, is next to a cattle grid at the entrance to Clarke's Chase, which allows access to the farm bordering the western side. It is intended as a record shot.

Photograph 2

Pentax Super-A, 50mm lens, Boots ISO 200. 1/500, f16. November 1998.



The bridges are the common's most attractive feature (though not quite Madison County). This shot, looking northish, shows a cultivated field at the left hand side, and evidence of wheeled traffic along the right. I tried to make a feature of the tree behind the bridge, and as this is on a third, the composition works fairly well. The right side is a little wasted, and I should have got closer to eliminate some of this and the weak sky (if I were printing the picture I would crop this area). Considering it was taken in November, there is still a remarkable amount of greenery left.



Photograph 3

Pentax Super-A, 50mm lens, Boots ISO 200. 1/60, f4. October 1998.



Some of the bridges are unsafe, but this one is in use. Unlike the previous shot, this picture has its horizon on the upper third, which is pleasing, and cuts out some of the sky. The old sugar beet factory on the A47 can be seen in the distance, near the left-hand margin. The water, by the way, is fairly clear, though the relative paucity of wildlife in the area could be due to run-off of organo-phosphates.



Photograph 4

Pentax Super-A, 50mm lens, Boots ISO 200. 1/125, f8. October 1998.



This close-up of an overgrown bridge has a gothic feel, though it is unfortunate that the foreground is over-exposed. The aperture could have been closed down a stop to help reduce this without throwing the greenery into shadow. From a distance, the matted grass hanging over the water looked like a dead cat.



Photograph 5

Pentax Super-A, 50mm lens, Boots ISO 200. October 1998.



Another bridge, this time useable only at risk. This is looking east. My focus was more on the house building in the distance, and for once I managed to get some cloud detail. I set a small aperture to get maximum depth of field. In retrospect I should have moved slightly to the left to get more of the church tower which is peeping from behind the tree next to the roofless building.



Photograph 6

Pentax Super-A, 50mm lens, Boots ISO 200. 1/60, f22. October 1998.



Still by the ditch, this was shot contre jour. I had to get as far down the bank as possible to avoid flare by screening the sun behind the tree. Again, a narrow aperture was required to get the pipe in focus, though the grass in the foreground is still blurred, and the left hand side is underexposed. I bracketed shots, and this was the best, the others being still more underexposed.



Photograph 7

Pentax Super-A, 50mm lens, Boots ISO 200. 1/125, f22. October 1998.



Looking north along the railway track, this provides good perspective, and a sense of the place's flatness. The browns and greens complement each other, and the late afternoon glow gives a slightly nostalgic tinge. The Campbell's soup factory is visible on the skyline. I tried to take a picture of this by getting as far to the north as I could, but with a standard lens it still appeared as a dot. (It should be mentioned that his photograph stretches the brief a little as to get to the railway it is necessary to cross fields next to the common.)



Photograph 8

Pentax Super-A, 50mm lens, Boots ISO 200. 1/125, f22. October 1998.



Using a small aperture, I tried framing the sugar beet factory between the trees dividing the common from the farm to the west. The furrows obligingly go in the right direction, leading the eye to the factory. The clouds look attractive, which is just as well given the amount of sky, as once again the horizon is in the middle. Although overall the picture is well exposed, there is an unsightly shadow in the foreground, but this is hard to avoid in autumn. A differently coloured building would also have given a stronger focus.

Photograph 9

Miranda MS3, 28-70mm lens, Boots 400 ISO. 1/125, f3.5. November 1998.



I took several pictures in the mist, and this is probably the best. Unlike the preceding photographs, this, and those following, were taken towards the south end of the common. The mist has muted the colours, and supplied a painterly feel. The off-centre composition has worked well, and lack of cloud detail for once is not a problem. A faster film has allowed a decent shutter speed given the poor light conditions, but even so a fairly wide aperture was required.



Photograph 10

Miranda MS3, 28-70mm lens, Boots 400 ISO. 1/30, f8. January 1999.



As can be seen in the background, drainage on the common is not particularly good, making movement difficult (especially without Wellingtons). This fallen tree made a pleasing composition, though a slow shutter speed was necessary given the low light level. The pylons which mar the southern end can be seen striding off into the distance.



Photograph 11

Miranda MS3, 28-70mm lens, Boots 400 ISO. 1/125, f3.5, tripod, fill-in flash with green gel. January 1999.



This is the only photograph in the set taken with flash. A tripod was also used (one of its legs fell off shortly afterwards). The idea was to show the fascinatingly warty tree trunk in a kind of hyper-reality, a sort of Spirit of the Woods, so a green gel was used over the flash. It has worked well, the image filling the frame, although I admit it would not be to everybody's taste.